



The Holy See

MESSAGE OF JOHN PAUL II TO THE CLERICS REGULAR OF THE MOTHER OF GOD

*To the Most Reverend Fr Vincenzo Molinaro
Superior General of the Order of the Mother of God*

1. For this Order, the happy event of the fourth centenary of the entrustment by my Predecessor, Clement VIII, with the Brief *Apud sanctum marcum* of 14 August 1601, of the church of *Santa Maria in Portico*, as well as of the venerated icon of the Blessed Virgin Mary, *Romanae Portus Securitatis* - *Safe Harbour of Rome* - to your founder, St John Leonardi, is a special cause for commemoration and rejoicing. On this occasion I am pleased to extend my warmest good wishes to you, Reverend Father, and to the whole religious family of the Clerics Regular of the Mother of God, as I spiritually join in the common thanksgiving to the Lord for the countless heavenly gifts received since that memorable event.

The event had been long awaited by your developing spiritual family, whose members "made a vow to the Blessed Virgin to fast on the eve of her obligatory feasts, for a year, which they did" (C. Franciotti, *Croniche della Congregazione de' Chierici Regolari della Madre di Dio fondata in Lucca l'anno 1574*, in *Archivio dei chierici Regolari della Madre di Dio*, Rome, Ms. Armadio A, parte 3, marzo 33, p. 474). That was an important moment because it put the new order at the centre of Catholicity and opened it to universal perspectives.

2. The document sanctioning the presence in Rome of the Clerics Regular of the Mother of God came at a particularly positive moment for them. From 30 November 1597 to 9 April the following year, the Apostolic Visitation to the Order, desired by Clement VIII took place. The documents of the time mention "the fruit which ... our Congregation acquired" (G.B. Cioni, *Letter of 18 April 1598*, copy n. 36, in *Archivio dei Chierici Regolari della Madre di Dio, Rome*) from this Visitation which, in fulfilling Pope Clement VIII's wishes, brought unity and clarity to the small community's charismatic approach, reconfirmed confidence in the Founder and impressed upon the Congregation a more far-sighted apostolic zeal. Not less important with respect to these results was the desire to set out

from Lucca to broader apostolic horizons that more closely corresponded to the needs of the times.

In this context the founder was beset with ever more insistent entreaties by his spiritual sons to take on, at the earliest opportunity, some further commitment in a Roman church. Attempts were made which, even if they were not successful, nonetheless showed important members of the Curia the desire and, above all, the merits of Fr John Leonardi. One of these, Cardinal Benedetto Giustiniani, who held the saint in high esteem, took their request particularly to heart. He spoke of it to certain highly placed prelates, obtaining the immediate availability of Cardinal Bartolomeo Cesi, a nephew of Pope Innocent IX and titular of the churches *Santa Maria in Portico* and *Santi Quattro Coronati*.

They took possession of the parish church of Santa Maria in Portico on 19 August 1601, but the news of the church's entrustment had arrived on the eve of the Feast of the Assumption, while the Order was preparing to celebratt their heavenly Patroness. The founder received this news with faith and enthusiasm, especially since he saw in it a sign of special predilection of the Blessed Virgin who was leading him and his sons from the little church of *Santa Maria della Rosa in Lucca*, where the work had come into being in 1574, to a shrine on the banks of the Tiber that was also dedicated to her. The founder, as he wrote to his religious, was therefore committed to "responding to such a favour by making a spiritual gift of yourself to the Virgin Spouse, promising her that you will give up one of your greatest imperfections and then, and a material one, coming to her aid in this beginning of things in common" (G. Leonardi, *Letter of 24 August 1601*, in V. Pascucci, *Lettere di un fondatore*, p. 89).

3. With the arrival of the Clerics Regular of the Order of the Mother of God, a period of material and spiritual rebirth began for *Santa Maria in Portico*, such that St John Leonardi began to be considered the third founder of the shrine, after my venerable predecessors, John I and Gregory VII.

In particular the presence of the saint, who in 1605 decided to compile a brief compendium of the history and traditions that had grown up around the shrine, became a significant reference point and increased Marian devotion, laying the foundations for what would later become a centre of Mariological devotion, study and research.

Problems abounded. Indeed, the structural condition of the church and annexed buildings was precarious and in such a state of dilapidation that it looked like "a shepherd's cottage or hut". The flooding of the Tiber gave rise to an unhealthy humidity and dangerous infections which, in 1609, caused the death of many religious, including the founder himself. This prompted the Order, at the Congregation that met to elect St John Leonardi's successor, although reasserting the determination to remain in "that church of so great a devotion", to give an account of their difficult situation to Pope Paul V, asking him "for some other retreat, where they could care for the sick

and seek shelter in the dangerous weather" (A. Bernardini, *Croniche*, parte III, p. 6).

A few years later, the Pontiff Alexander VII, recognizing that the site of the church of *Santa Maria in Portico* was "too remote from trade and equally sordid and vile, in short not at all suitable", built the church of *Santa Maria in Campitelli* in one of the most beautiful and characteristic places of Rome, where this religious family established its General Curia more than three centuries ago. In 1662, the image of Our Lady *Romanae Portus Securitatis* was moved to the new Church, which thus acquired the name of *Santa Maria in Portico in Campitelli*.

4. I give thanks to the Lord for the good done in the course of these four centuries by the members of the Order at the service of this Marian shrine and of the city of Rome. I hope that the celebrations for the fourth centenary of the entrustment of the Church of *Santa Maria in Portico* will inspire in all a renewed aspiration to holiness and to apostolic service, in total fidelity to the Institute's charism and in constant, loving discernment of the signs of the times.

I very gladly join the Clerics Regular of the Mother of God who, in giving thanks for the protection of Mary, "*Safe Harbour of Rome*", would like to experience this event as an opportunity to set out anew from Christ, putting all their plans in the context of the continuous quest for holiness, the high standard of Christian living. I encourage them in particular so that, guided and protected by the Mother of Jesus, they may work to make every community a school of communion, brotherhood and service. May they be an authentic "landing place" for all who are in search of truth, inner peace and divine love.

As I recall the Pastoral Visit I made on 29 April 1984 and after the example of so many of my venerable predecessors, I renew the entrustment to Mary's heavenly protection of the entire Order of the Mother of God and of the people who daily visit this church dedicated to her. With these sentiments, present in spirit at your Jubilee celebrations, I cordially impart to you all the Apostolic Blessing, which fosters fervour, peace and every good.

From the Vatican, 25 July 2001.

JOHN PAUL II